

3. Preliminary analysis of enforced disappearances data

The Commission has received a total of 1837 complaints related to enforced disappearances. Following a first round of review, 1772 of these complaints were entered into the Commission's database as active cases. Among these active cases, 1427 victims have surfaced alive, and 345 individuals remain missing till date.

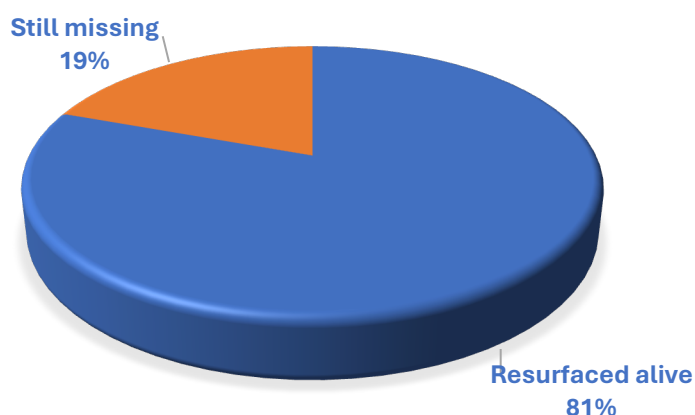


Fig 3A: Breakdown of complaints

The data further reveal the involvement of specific law enforcement and security agencies in these incidents. The vast majority of enforced disappearances are linked to formal State agencies, reflecting systematic practices rather than isolated incidents. Law enforcement bodies, notably the Police, RAB, DB, and CTTC are responsible for over 67% of cases. When their combined operations are included, the proportion rises significantly, underscoring their central role.

Many cases involve joint operations between multiple State bodies, which complicate both oversight and accountability. Specialised and intelligence-driven units – such as DGFI and NSI – often appear in combination with primary law enforcement agencies, suggesting coordinated actions. Though less frequently cited individually, agencies like the Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB) and National Security Intelligence (NSI) appear repeatedly in conjunction with other forces. Their presence, while limited, indicates a pattern of occasional but strategically significant involvement.

The dominance of formal law enforcement and intelligence agencies in the data suggests significant institutional involvement or complicity in these cases. The relatively low figures for agencies like NSI and BGB may indicate either a lesser role in internal security operations or possible underreporting. Additionally, the presence of individuals in plainclothes claiming to be members of law enforcement indicates covert operations, with the resulting challenges in establishing accountability and attribution.

Legal concerns

From a legal standpoint, enforced disappearances reflect a breakdown in lawful identification and procedural safeguards. It undermines the rule of law and the individual's right to security, liberty, and due process. Analysing the data on enforced disappearances from a legal perspective involves assessing the implications under international human rights law, domestic legal frameworks, and the principles of due process, accountability, and the rule of law. It includes evaluating the nature and roles of the institutions involved and the broader legal consequences.

Enforced disappearances form a violation of fundamental rights

- Right to life and liberty (ICCPR Art. 6 & 9; Constitution of Bangladesh, Articles 31, 32).
- Prohibition of torture and inhuman treatment (CAT, ICCPR Art. 7; Constitution of Bangladesh, Articles 35(5)).
- Due process and fair trial rights are routinely denied when a person is disappeared.

Lack of accountability

1. The high numbers, especially from State security organs, suggest a culture of impunity.
2. Failure to investigate, prosecute, or acknowledge these cases can itself be a form of State complicity.

Crimes against humanity (Rome Statute, Art. 7)

- If widespread or systematic, enforced disappearances may amount to crimes against humanity.
- Key elements include: repeated patterns, involvement of high-level orders, targeting of specific groups (e.g., opposition members and activists).

The data strongly indicate State involvement in the acts of enforced disappearances in Bangladesh. The high number of cases attributed to official and specialised security forces like the Police, RAB, and DB, all operating under State command, suggest that these acts were carried out with State knowledge, authorisation, or complicity. The data also paint a picture of militarisation of law enforcement, blurring of institutional boundaries, and a systemic accountability crisis. From a legalistic point of view, this suggests systemic violations of international human rights law, potential for international criminal responsibility, and an urgent need for legal reform, transparency, and accountability.

Security forces involved in enforced disappearances

The Commission's assessment reveals that the majority of enforced disappearances in Bangladesh have been carried out by various units under the Bangladesh police and intelligence agencies. Victims, witnesses, and family members most frequently identified the police, the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB), the Detective Branch (DB), and the Counter Terrorism and Transnational Crimes (CTTC) as the main perpetrators. Additionally, personnel from the Directorate General of Forces Intelligence (DGFI), the National Security Intelligence (NSI), and Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB) were also implicated in playing a role in these disappearances.

Both DGFI and NSI typically operate in intelligence, not law enforcement. As they have no legal mandate to arrest or detain civilians, any involvement in detentions, abductions, or interrogations crosses constitutional boundaries.

This suggests potential illegal parallel enforcement structures—a serious constitutional concern. It is worth noting that all the law enforcement and intelligence agencies have violated and/or overstepped their standard operating procedure or charter of duties while carrying out operations.

Police

The Bangladesh Police is the principal law enforcement agency of the country, operating under the Ministry of Home Affairs. It is responsible for maintaining law and order, preventing and investigating crimes, and ensuring internal security. Headed by the Inspector General of Police (IGP), the force included specialised units such as the Detective Branch (DB), Special Branch (SB), Criminal Investigation Department (CID), and Rapid Action Battalion (RAB). Although established during British colonial rule, the police has evolved significantly since Bangladesh's independence in 1971.

Under the Awami League government, the police came under sustained scrutiny for widespread human rights violations, including extrajudicial killings, enforced disappearances, torture in custody, suppression of dissent, and excessive use of force. From 2009 onward, the police became increasingly politicised, functioning more as an enforcer of government policy than as a neutral public institution. Numerous national and international reports documented the disproportionate targeting of opposition groups, particularly the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and Jamaat-e-Islami, raising serious concerns about the erosion of democratic space and civil liberties.

Extrajudicial killings—frequently labelled as “crossfire” incidents—became a hallmark of police operations, especially during anti-drug raids or crackdowns on suspected criminals. These killings often took place without judicial oversight. Torture in custody was also pervasive. Victims reported severe abuse, including beatings, electric shocks, waterboarding, and other forms of physical and psychological torture. Although the Torture and Custodial Death (Prevention) Act of 2013 was enacted to curb such practices, it was rarely enforced, and few officers faced legal consequences.

The police also routinely cracked down on peaceful protests, student movements, and press freedom, most notably during the July Uprising in 2024. Repressive laws such as the Special Powers Act and the Digital Security Act were widely used to arrest dissenters on vague charges such as “hurting religious sentiment” or “spreading propaganda.”

The Commission has documented hundreds of enforced disappearances carried out by the police. Victims included political activists, students, teachers, businesspeople, and critics of the government. Many were severely tortured and ultimately extrajudicially killed after being disappeared. These patterns revealed a structural crisis within the police: a culture of impunity,

systematic abuse of power, and a lack of institutional accountability—all in direct contradiction to their constitutional mandate to uphold the rule of law and protect citizens.

Rapid Action Battalion

The Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) is a paramilitary law enforcement agency established in 2004 under the Ministry of Home Affairs, originally tasked with tackling serious crimes such as terrorism, drug trafficking, and organised crime. The force comprises 15 battalions across the country, each with three to four Crime Prevention Companies (CPCs) under each battalion. Under the leadership of the Director General, it operates through ten functional wings. Under the direction of ADG (Ops): Operations, Intelligence, Legal and Media, and Air Wings; and under the direction of ADG (Admin): Admin and Finance, Communication and MIS, Investigation and Forensics, Training and Orientation, and Research and Development Wings. RAB's headquarters are located in Kurmitola, Dhaka.

While RAB initially played a prominent role in combating crime and maintaining public order, it soon became synonymous with serious human rights abuses. The Commission has received hundreds of complaints involving RAB's direct participation in enforced disappearances, custodial torture, and extrajudicial killings. National and international organisations have documented a pattern of individuals allegedly picked up by RAB who were later found dead or remained missing, raising grave concerns regarding the agency's adherence to rule of law and human rights standards.

Although RAB had been created with support from the United States and the United Kingdom as a counterterrorism force, it eventually morphed into a political death squad. The force operated with significant autonomy, and the lack of robust oversight enabled widespread abuse. The UK Government withdrew its support and training over a decade ago in response to its poor human rights record, and the United States imposed sanctions in December 2021 citing gross violations, including extrajudicial executions and enforced disappearances.

The Intelligence Wing of RAB, working in close coordination with operational battalions, conducted many covert operations. These included abductions and prolonged detentions in secret facilities under the pretext of fighting militancy, narcotics, and arms trafficking. One of the most notorious sites was the Task Force for Interrogation (TFI) cell, located within the RAB-1 compound. Though publicly framed as an inter-agency facility, it was de facto operated and controlled by RAB Intelligence. Thousands of detainees were held in this facility, confined for weeks or months in pitch-dark rooms, blindfolded and handcuffed at all times.

Testimonies revealed that detainees were subjected to relentless torture within specialised rooms: methods included beatings, electrocution, suspension from ceilings, rotational disorientation, and even physical dismemberment. Children and mentally unwell detainees were not spared. Although the facility was primarily run by military personnel, police officers also participated in operations. Detainees were brought to the TFI Cell from across the country, some directly abducted by RAB Intelligence, others transferred from DGFI or local RAB battalions. In many cases, individuals were later executed and their bodies disposed of in rivers, rendering recovery and identification virtually impossible. The Commission continues to receive near-daily accounts of torture at this site, reflecting the scale and consistency of its abuse.

Following the 5 August 2024 change in government, concerted efforts were made to erase evidence of the facility's true nature. Cells were remodelled to appear larger, torture chambers were dismantled, surveillance equipment was removed, and floor tiles were excavated to obliterate forensic traces. This destruction of evidence was part of a broader pattern of obstruction.

RAB's methods deeply eroded public trust in law enforcement. The force's use in political repression—particularly against opposition parties, activists, and dissenters—transformed it from a crime-fighting body into a coercive political tool. Victims' statements indicated that RAB officers acted with impunity, knowing they were unlikely to be held accountable. This emboldened conduct had far-reaching consequences: it weakened public safety by creating fear of law enforcement, discouraged victims and witnesses from coming forward, and fuelled a wider culture of institutional unaccountability.

Despite the fall of the previous government, RAB as an institution has continued to exist. The legacy of its operations—and the deep mistrust it cultivated—remains a significant barrier to democratic reform. The Commission believes that meaningful change will require **the dismantling of RAB as a force**. Its dissolution is essential to break the cycle of impunity, restore public confidence, and enable the creation of a rights-respecting security framework.

Detective Branch

The Detective Branch (DB) of the Bangladesh Police is a specialised unit responsible for intelligence gathering, investigation of serious crimes, surveillance, and, in many cases, political policing. Functioning under the Dhaka Metropolitan Police (DMP) and other metropolitan

jurisdictions, the DB plays a central role in law enforcement operations, particularly through covert investigations and intelligence-led actions.

However, the unit has come under sustained scrutiny for grave human rights violations. Numerous allegations were made that DB personnel abducted political opponents, activists, and suspected criminals; detained them in undisclosed locations; failed to acknowledge the arrests; conducted arbitrary detentions without warrants; and held individuals incommunicado. Victims frequently reported custodial torture, enforced disappearances, extrajudicial killings, and transfers to other security agencies such as the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) and the Directorate General of Forces Intelligence (DGFI).

The DB was widely believed to be an instrument of political repression during the tenure of the Awami League Government. It was accused of targeting opposition figures—particularly members and supporters of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) and Jamaat-e-Islami—often during politically sensitive periods such as election cycles. A substantial number of enforced disappearances reportedly occurred in the lead-up to national elections, reflecting the DB’s role in suppressing dissent.

Patterns of abuse were consistent across cases. Victims were often taken by plainclothes officers in unmarked vehicles, with families being denied any information about their whereabouts. Some reappeared weeks or months later, while others remained missing indefinitely or were found dead, often bearing signs of torture. These actions, routinely attributed to the DB—either acting alone or in collaboration with RAB and DGFI—highlights systemic abuse within Bangladesh’s security architecture.

The frequency and nature of these disappearances prompted concern from both domestic and international human rights organisations. Although hard evidence remained elusive due to the clandestine nature of the operations, the volume of eyewitness testimonies, the uniformity of the abduction patterns, and the institutional opacity collectively presented a compelling case for accountability.

The DB’s legacy has been one of impunity and repression. The Commission's findings reinforces the urgent need for institutional reform, independent oversight, and judicial accountability. Ending such violations would require not only strong domestic legal mechanisms but also sustained international pressure to uphold human rights and ensure justice for victims of enforced disappearance.

Counter Terrorism and Transnational Crime

The Counter Terrorism and Transnational Crime (CTTC) Unit of the Bangladesh Police, established in 2016, was tasked with combating terrorism, organised crime, and transnational criminal activities. It comprises seven specialised divisions, including the Special Action Group (SWAT), Bomb Disposal Unit, Anti-Illegal Arms Unit, Canine Unit, and Cyber Crime Unit. While the CTTC has claimed to play a vital role in addressing emerging security threats, it has become associated with the same patterns of abuse and impunity that have long plagued other security forces, such as the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB).

Even when they detain captives unlawfully over briefer periods than other agencies, CTTC operatives have been reported to inflict severe harm through strategic misuse of the legal system. The unit has been known to initiate numerous false cases, thereby weaponising the judiciary to wage ‘lawfare’ against targeted individuals. Like RAB in its earlier years—backed by foreign governments in the name of counterterrorism—the CTTC has benefited from international support. Yet, as with RAB, this foreign backing has not prevented its descent into grave human rights violations.

The CTTC has faced serious allegations of enforced disappearances, torture, and arbitrary detention. Human rights defenders both within and outside Bangladesh have consistently raised concerns about the disappearance of individuals suspected of so-called terrorist or criminal affiliations. These actions continue to erode the rule of law and deepen public mistrust in the justice system. The Commission has documented numerous instances where individuals were forcibly disappeared, held incommunicado, and subjected to abuse under the guise of interrogation. In several cases, victims were later presented with concocted charges or have never resurfaced at all. Detainees have described being subjected to brutal torture intended to extract information or forced confessions. Such confessions, obtained under duress, have compromised the integrity of investigations and judicial proceedings. Victims interviewed by the Commission have recounted psychological torment and physical abuse while in CTTC custody. Judicial scrutiny and institutional oversight remain lacking, allowing these abuses to persist unchecked.

A persistent concern has been the CTTC’s arrest of individuals without proper evidence or legal basis, particularly those affiliated, or alleged to be affiliated, with political or religious groups deemed oppositional to the Government. These actions have appeared politically motivated rather than grounded in genuine security concerns. Victims from specific communities have reported feeling disproportionately targeted, fuelling a sense of collective grievance and injustice.

The CTTC has continued to operate under a veil of opacity, with minimal public access to information about its operations or outcomes. Despite serious allegations, meaningful accountability mechanisms have remained absent. Officers accused of misconduct—ranging from unlawful detention to torture—have rarely faced consequences. As a result, the CTTC has fostered an internal culture of impunity not unlike that which ultimately discredited RAB.

The Commission’s findings indicate that the CTTC, rather than functioning as a neutral counterterrorism body, has come to mirror the very practices and impunity that international partners had once condemned in other agencies. If the trajectory of RAB serves as a warning, then the CTTC now stands at a similar crossroads—where unchecked power, foreign backing, and political misuse have led to systematic violations and a widespread loss of public trust.

Directorate General of Forces Intelligence

The Directorate General of Forces Intelligence (DGFI), Bangladesh’s principal military intelligence agency, was formed in 1977 under the Ministry of Defence and is primarily staffed by personnel from the Bangladesh Armed Forces. Its core responsibilities include military intelligence gathering (both domestic and foreign), counter-intelligence, surveillance of national security threats, and conducting internal and external threat assessments. It is headed by a Director General, typically a serving Major General (two-star general) from the Bangladesh Army.

Over the past decade, the DGFI has faced persistent allegations of enforced disappearances, unlawful detentions, torture, and surveillance of political opponents. The agency has also been accused of manipulating domestic politics and interfering in the 2014 Parliamentary elections. Its alignment with the ruling Awami League Government seriously compromised its perceived neutrality. The lack of parliamentary oversight—being answerable only to the Defence Minister—has contributed to accusations of unchecked authority and institutional opacity.

Credible reports from international organisations and media outlets document widespread human rights abuses by DGFI personnel. The agency has reportedly operated black sites—including the notorious Aynaghor (House of Mirrors)³—where detainees were held incommunicado and

³ Although DGFI’s JIC was originally known as the *aynaghor* (“house of mirrors”), we have increasingly observed that the term is now used colloquially to refer to all secret detention centres. The phenomenon is similar to how all motorcycles are commonly referred to as “Honda” in Bangladesh. Thus, this shift in usage should not cause confusion.

subjected to extreme torture. DGFI's deepening involvement in civilian affairs over the years has raised serious concerns about democratic erosion and the militarisation of governance.

DGFI's elite counterterrorism unit, the Counter Terrorism and Intelligence Bureau (CTIB), was formed in 2006 to combat terrorism and manage threat intelligence. CTIB runs the Joint Interrogation Centre (JIC), colloquially known as "Aynaghor", located within Dhaka Cantonment. This site is one of the most infamous detention facilities in the country, known for its extensive use of torture and prolonged secret detention. Detainees at Aynaghor included military officials, political opponents, and individuals accused—often falsely—of terrorism, such as Brigadier Abdullah Aman Azmi, Ambassador Maruf Zaman, Lt. Col. Hasinur Rahman, Hummam Quader Chowdhury, and Michael Chakma, along with hundreds of lesser-known individuals.

Due to DGFI's limited operational capacity, it frequently relied on RAB Intelligence for operational support when conducting abductions. After interrogation and torture, detainees were either returned to RAB or transferred to the Detective Branch, where many were subsequently executed extrajudicially or held under fabricated charges for extended periods.

Aynaghor was run entirely by military officers seconded to DGFI. It contained multiple interrogation rooms where detainees were tortured using beatings, suspension from ceilings, electric shocks, and disorientation through rotating chairs. Loud exhaust fans masked the noise, and victims were kept blindfolded and shackled for long durations, often in solitary confinement. Survivors interviewed by the Commission continue to exhibit lasting psychological trauma, even years after their release.

Although the DGFI has played an essential role in national defence and counterterrorism, its expansion into civilian and political domains has posed grave risks to democratic governance and civil liberties. Its future legitimacy as an intelligence agency depends on urgent reforms aimed at ensuring transparency, accountability, and compliance with human rights standards. Only then can it function as a professional and apolitical institution within a democratic framework.

National Security Intelligence

The National Security Intelligence (NSI) functions as Bangladesh's principal civilian intelligence agency under the Defence Minister's Office, with mandates covering both domestic and foreign intelligence. It collects and analyses information related to national security, counterintelligence,

counterterrorism, and the surveillance of political and subversive activities. It also engages in border intelligence and monitors threats to state sovereignty.

The NSI operates alongside other agencies, such as the Directorate General of Forces Intelligence (DGFI) and the Special Branch (SB), leading to overlapping jurisdictions, redundancy, and inter-agency friction. Its operational effectiveness has come under serious scrutiny due to increasing politicisation. Allegations suggest that the agency is used to monitor and suppress political opposition, civil society, and journalists rather than focus strictly on national security threats.

The NSI operates without a comprehensive legal statute defining its powers, limitations, and oversight mechanisms. It lacks independent parliamentary or judicial oversight, raising concerns about unchecked authority and the potential for human rights violations. The Commission has received complaints implicating the NSI in enforced disappearances. Human rights organisations also accuse it of involvement in torture and other abuses, with victims having limited legal recourse due to the opaque nature of its operations.

While the NSI plays a vital role in maintaining national security and has contributed to counterterrorism and intelligence efforts, it faces critical challenges. These include politicisation, lack of transparency, inadequate oversight, and serious human rights concerns. Addressing these issues requires substantial legal and institutional reform to ensure the NSI functions as a modern, accountable intelligence agency.

Border Guard Bangladesh

The Border Guard Bangladesh (BGB), formerly known as the Bangladesh Rifles, functions as a paramilitary force primarily responsible for guarding the country's borders. Operating under the Ministry of Home Affairs, it undertakes a range of duties including preventing cross-border crime and smuggling, countering human trafficking, and supporting internal security operations. Following the 2009 BDR mutiny, the force underwent reorganisation and rebranding as BGB, with enhanced oversight and renewed mandates.

Credible allegations from both local and international human rights organisations—including Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International—accuse Bangladeshi security forces, including the BGB, of involvement in enforced disappearances, particularly since 2010. Although elite units such as the Rapid Action Battalion (RAB) and Detective Branch (DB) are more frequently cited, BGB is implicated in several cases, especially in border and counter-insurgency contexts. In areas

bordering India and Myanmar, reports have emerged of extrajudicial killings and disappearances linked to BGB operations. These incidents often remain undocumented due to the remoteness of the regions and restricted media access.

Enforced disappearance constitutes an inter-state crime due to its cross-border dimensions. Victims are at times abducted in one country and delivered to the authorities of another, making the involvement of border security forces from both states almost inevitable. The Commission's inquiry finds that such cross-border transfers or exchanges of captives would not be possible without the collusion or active cooperation of BGB and the Indian Border Security Force (BSF). Cases such as the disappearances of Shukhoranjan Bali, BNP leader Salauddin Ahmed, Mehedi Hasan Dollar, and Rahamatullah serve as stark examples of cross-border rendition involving India.

Testimony before the Commission reveals that RAB usually notified BGB before conducting cross-border renditions, specifying border locations where their vehicles would cross a few hundred metres into Indian territory and captives would be transferred from Bangladesh to India. Detainees were reportedly handed over to Indian intelligence and security agencies directly or through intermediaries.

While the BGB plays a vital role in safeguarding national security, persistent allegations of enforced disappearances seriously undermine its legitimacy and the rule of law. In the absence of accountability, such abuses risk becoming institutionalised, weakening democratic structures and threatening the fundamental rights of citizens. A transparent, rights-based reform process is essential to restoring the credibility of the BGB and strengthening the broader security architecture of Bangladesh.